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**"My Voice Matters": High School Debaters' Acquisition of Dominant and Adaptive Cultural Capital**

**Abstract:** Low-income racial/ethnic-minority youth in under-resourced school contexts have certain opportunities to acquire institutionally-valued cultural capital. I use observational data from six months of debate practices and competitions with two teams in the Chicago Debate League, as well as interviews with twelve debaters and two coaches, to show that debate participation can contribute to participants' acquisition of two forms of cultural capital. Specifically, I document how debaters develop dominant cultural capital in the form of building comfort in demanding critical feedback and analyzing complex ideas. I further demonstrate how debaters develop "adaptive cultural capital": cultural capital which dominant institutions demand of them, but which is not required of members of dominant social groups. Here, adaptive cultural capital is illustrated through debaters' ability to face failure with resilience. These findings presented in this paper contribute to sociological understandings of how schools influence students' acquisition of diverse forms of cultural capital.

## **“My Voice Matters”: High School Debaters' Acquisition of Dominant and Adaptive Cultural Capital**

### **Introduction**

Schools in the United States are characterized by profound degrees of inequality such that low-income students rarely have the same educational opportunities as their wealthier peers (Kozol 1991; Borman and Dowling 2010). Though many factors play a role in this disparity, a significant body of research has shown that youths' access to dominant cultural capital contributes substantially to the reproduction of structural inequality (Bourdieu 1973; Willis 1977; Bettie 2003; Lareau 2011). This is in part because navigating schools to make the most of educational opportunities is facilitated by dominant, middle-class cultural knowledge (Lareau 1987; Lewis 2003; Jack 2016; Calarco 2018). As such, schools' potential to support their students' acquisition of dominant cultural capital is important for improving the educational opportunities of low-income youth, who often can only access certain information and skills at school (Lewis 2003). Though the frequently hidden, implicit nature of dominant cultural capital can make it challenging to obtain in school (Bourdieu 1973; Bourdieu & Passeron 1977), there are certain aspects of cultural capital that can be taught, such as when to speak out and ask questions (Jack 2016), or how to navigate “dense,” multifaceted relationships with faculty (Khan 2010, 64). However, schools that serve low-income youth are often ill-equipped to furnish their students with these skills, as they are less likely than schools serving wealthier students to employ highly-qualified teachers, offer a diverse and challenging curriculum, and provide a variety of extracurricular opportunities (Kozol 1991; Darling-Hammond 2006).

A substantial literature exists that aims to understand how the cultural capital that youth bring to schools shapes their opportunities to learn (Willis 1977; Lareau 1987; Bettie 2002; Lewis 2003; Khan 2010; Jack 2016; Calarco 2018). Despite these efforts, little is known about

avenues for low-income youth to acquire dominant cultural capital in under-resourced school settings. Further, while existing studies have documented how students from various class backgrounds are afforded different resources within economically diverse schools (Bettie 2002; Calarco 2018), and how low-income students who attend prestigious, well-resourced schools can gain dominant cultural capital (Khan 2010; Jack 2016), little work has been done to understand the ways in which diversity can arise in the cultural capital held by low-income students within under-resourced schools. Finally, although research has shown that members of marginalized groups are expected to have unique forms of cultural capital in order to access and thrive in dominant institutions (Berg 2010; Armstrong & Hamilton 2013), this work has failed to conceptualize the distinction between dominant cultural capital which both dominant and non-dominant students need, and what I term “adaptive cultural capital” which only students from non-dominant social groups must possess.

In this study, I address these gaps by drawing on six months of ethnographic observations and interviews with two high school debate teams in Chicago Public Schools (CPS). I find that participation in interscholastic debate enables racial/ethnic minority, poor and working-class students to acquire cultural capital that facilitates their success in schools. Debaters in the study developed dominant cultural capital in the form of building comfort demanding critical feedback and deconstructing and analyzing complex ideas. Debaters also developed adaptive cultural capital in the form of building strategies for facing failure with resilience. While students enter school with existing stores of resilience, they viewed their debate experiences as contributing meaningfully to their ability to persevere. Because the habits and attitudes that debaters built are valuable for obtaining a high-quality education, I argue that competitive interscholastic debate constitutes one resource for non-dominant youth to thrive in dominant educational institutions. As increasing numbers of poor and working-class youth pursue post-secondary education, yet

often struggle to complete degree programs (Berg 2010), it is important for researchers and practitioners to better understand ways that schools can prepare their students to effectively navigate dominant cultural institutions.

## **Background**

### *Dominant and Adaptive Cultural Capital*

A large body of literature has shown that students' class backgrounds shape their school performance, and that cultural capital mediates this relationship (Heath 1983; Lareau 1987; Fischer et al. 1996; Lewis 2003; Jack 2016; Calarco 2018). This research, often guided by Pierre Bourdieu's (1973) early insights into schools, illustrates how schools benefit students with high cultural capital. According to Bourdieu, the public education system both rewards youth who possess dominant cultural capital and punishes those who lack it; as a result, schools are "bound to become the monopoly of those social classes" that define the dominant culture within them (1973, 181). This perspective is pessimistic about the prospects for social mobility among children from families with low levels of dominant cultural capital because it views schools as responsible for the reproduction, not disruption, of existing social hierarchies. In this view, culture is one of the overlapping and interlocking social systems that "differently prepare children to come to school and differently reward them once they are there" (Lewis 2003, 156).

Although many conceptions of cultural capital exist, common across them is the notion that cultural capital is one form of capital – along with human, social, symbolic, economic, etc. – through which individuals can exercise power in society. Building upon, but nuancing, Bourdieu's work, Lamont and Lareau define cultural capital as "institutionalized, i.e., widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods and credentials) [directly or indirectly] used for social and cultural exclusion" (1988, 156). Throughout this paper, I utilize Lamont and Lareau's definition of cultural capital, specifically

focusing on the attitudes, preferences, knowledge, and behaviors demonstrated by high school debaters. I refer to the cultural capital defined by Lamont and Lareau as “dominant cultural capital” in order to emphasize its connection to “high status cultural signals” (1988, 156) and to distinguish it from forms of “non-dominant cultural capital” that are less valued in educational settings (Carter 2003). In this paper, when I refer to the “dominant” culture in schools, and the “dominant cultural capital” which they value, I mean those cultural signals that are reflective of white, middle-class norms (Lareau & Horvat, 1999); non-dominant cultural capital, then, refers to cultural signals that reflect the norms of other cultural groups, such as communities of color (Yosso 2005; Carter 2003). It is important to note that dominant and non-dominant cultural capital can co-exist, and that the acquisition of one does not necessitate the repudiation of the other (Carter 2003). Youth of all social backgrounds bring meaningful forms of cultural capital to schools; however, certain forms of cultural capital are more valued than others by dominant institutions, and are therefore particularly useful for one’s ability to thrive in a stratified society.<sup>1</sup>

Recent sociological work has supported Bourdieu's early perspective by outlining how adolescents who lack dominant cultural capital struggle to engage effectively with authorities in institutional settings such as schools (Khan 2010; Lareau 2011; Jack 2016; Calarco 2018). For example, Annette Lareau argues that middle-class children learn to demonstrate a “sense of entitlement” which empowers them to demand customized interactions with authorities such as teachers and doctors, while poor and working-class children learn to display a “sense of constraint” marked by compliance with institutional rules and practices (2011, 6). Similarly, Jessica Calarco differentiates between middle-class children, whose parents teach them to navigate problems at school using “strategies of influence,” and working-class children, whose parents teach them to navigate problems at school using “strategies of deference” (2018, 22).

Beyond the K-12 setting, Jack (2016) describes middle-class undergraduates as being at

ease in interacting with instructors, as contrasted with the discomfort displayed by “doubly-disadvantaged” students who come from low-income families and attended distressed neighborhood high schools. However, Jack (2016) extends beyond Lareau's (1987; 2011) dual class-based framework to argue that the “privileged poor” — low-income students who attended high-quality selective high schools — behave more like middle-class students than other poor and working-class students due to the cultural capital they acquired in elite secondary schools. Overall, Jack's work demonstrates two key points: that there is heterogeneity in the cultural capital held by low-income students, and that cultural capital is crucial in framing how young people engage with educational institutions.

Dominant cultural capital is used by the gatekeepers of dominant educational institutions in order to exclude those not deemed fit for admission. Dominant cultural capital draws upon both racialized (white) and classed (middle-class) tastes, preferences, and behaviors (Lareau & Horvat 1999). Dominant cultural capital is necessary, but insufficient, for members of both dominant and non-dominant social groups to gain admission to dominant cultural spaces. However, members of non-dominant social groups must surpass the expectations held for members of dominant social groups in order to access and navigate dominant spaces (Berg 2010). They must possess not only dominant cultural capital, but also what I call “adaptive cultural capital.”

Adaptive cultural capital is a form of cultural capital that is required of members of non-dominant social groups seeking access to, and success in, dominant social spaces. It is unequally demanded: members of dominant social groups need not possess or demonstrate adaptive cultural capital (though they may), while members of non-dominant social groups must. For example, low-income college students typically require formal knowledge about when and how to apply for financial aid, while higher-income students do not. Such knowledge is needed for

low-income students to access and persist in dominant educational institutions, but is not neither needed nor common among the dominant classes who typically receive substantial parental financial support (Armstrong & Hamilton 2013). This knowledge – what Yosso (2005) terms “navigational capital” – is one example of adaptive cultural capital.<sup>2</sup>

Another example of adaptive cultural capital is “educationally profitable linguistic capital” (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977, 116). Bourdieu & Passeron use the case of linguistic capital to argue that working-class children who reach higher education have undergone “more stringent selection” than upper-class children because they have to meet the standards for linguistic competence set by upper classes (1977, 73). They argue that lower-class children meeting these standards developed their (educationally profitable) linguistic competency outside of their families, in contrast to the alignment found by higher-class children between language developed in the family and that demanded by institutional gatekeepers. While even the earliest work about cultural capital has noted that non-dominant youth “have had to manifest exceptional qualities in order to be channelled in this direction [towards a historically upper-class trajectory] and to persist in it,” (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977, 83), the nature of these “exceptional qualities” has remained unclear. Here, I consider them “adaptive cultural capital.”

To be clear, adaptive cultural capital does not refer to the notion that dominant social institutions must adapt to the needs of non-dominant members. Adaptation in this direction happens only occasionally; it is optional (Berg 2010; Mullen 2011; Armstrong & Hamilton 2013). Instead, it refers to the idea that non-dominant actors must adapt to the expectations placed upon them by dominant institutions in order to gain access to and successfully navigate these spaces. Adaptation in this direction is a necessary (but insufficient) precondition to access; it is required. Adaptive cultural capital enables certain members of marginalized social groups to thrive in an unequal and exclusionary society, contributing to the appearance of a meritocracy

and apparently legitimizing its functions despite durable inequalities.

Like all forms of cultural capital, adaptive cultural capital can be understood only in relation to the field in which it functions (Bourdieu 1985). In the table below (Fig. 1), I describe the necessary or optional nature of various forms of cultural capital for members of different social groups *in order to access and navigate dominant educational institutions*. The necessity, or lack thereof, of the forms of cultural capital for different groups varies based on the field being analyzed.

*Fig. 1: Forms of Cultural Capital Required to Access and Navigate Dominant Educational Institutions*

		Social Group Membership	
		Dominant	Non-Dominant
Forms of Cultural Capital	Dominant	Required	Required
	Adaptive	Optional	Required
	Non-Dominant	Optional	Optional

Here, I build on the cultural capital literature to illustrate how some low-income youth in under-resourced schools manage to acquire institutionally-valued cultural capital that can facilitate their success in dominant institutions, in this case through participation in competitive debate. In doing so, I outline one avenue for schools to support the acquisition of both dominant and adaptive cultural capital among their students, and more generally document how diversity can arise in the cultural capital of “doubly-disadvantaged” adolescents. Much of the existing literature about social class and education portrays poor and working-class students – especially those in under-resourced public schools – as uniformly uncomfortable, constrained, and/or deferential in their interactions with teachers. However, I argue that some such students can learn strategies for “negotiating advantages” with ease (Calarco 2018), despite their economically-disadvantaged home and school contexts, if given adequate opportunities to do so



in the school.

*Debate, Extracurricular Activities, and Social Class*

Class both affects how students interact with institutional authorities and works to enable or constrain opportunities for students within educational settings. In extracurricular activities generally and debate specifically, working class and poor students are less likely to participate than their upper- and middle-class peers (Fine 2001; Weininger, Lareau, and Conley 2015), a gap which has implications for adolescents' social and academic development (Mueller 2007). The costs of extracurricular participation explain some of the gap, but this view tells an incomplete story; Weininger et al. (2015) found evidence for both material and cultural explanations, in which limited financial resources could constrain adolescents' extracurricular participation, but cultural dispositions about parenting also contributed to lower participation among poor and working-class children. Thus, class backgrounds influence both whether and how much adolescents are able to accrue advantages from extracurricular participation.

While research shows that extracurricular participation is generally beneficial for schooling outcomes, debate in particular has interesting promise. Although a thorough detailing of debate activities is beyond the scope of this paper, Fine (2001) and Miller (2006) each offer rich descriptions of high school debate practices. Historically the domain of wealthy suburbanites, competitive high school debate has increasingly become available to students in cities since the creation of the first Urban Debate League (UDL) in Atlanta in 1985 (Fine 2001; Mezuk 2009). UDLs spread across the country during the 1990s, reaching Chicago in the form of the Chicago Debate League (CDL) in 1997 (CDL n.d.). Today, the CDL is the largest UDL in the country, serving roughly 1,400 students from approximately seventy-five schools in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) (CDL n.d.). Compared to non-debaters in their same schools, CDL debaters are more likely to qualify for free/reduced price lunch, are disproportionately female,

and have above-average school attendance in 9th grade (Mezuk et al. 2011). Mezuk et al. (2011) found significant gains in GPA, ACT scores, and graduation rates among 1,900 CDL debaters versus 7,245 comparable peers. Importantly, Mezuk et al. used propensity score matching to account for self-selection into the activity. Elsewhere, Barfield (1989) and Peters (2009) found improvement on SAT and ACT scores (respectively) for debaters as compared to non-debaters. While test-score improvements among debaters have been consistently documented, little is known about the processes contributing to these advantages. Understanding how debate works to confer academic gains to participants would be helpful for harnessing those processes for more students and designing effective policies to maximize students opportunities in school.

Debate, like other extracurricular activities, helps children build cultural capital in the form of “subtle micro-interactional skills” that afford advantages in school and the workplace (Weininger et al. 2015, 497). Better understanding what these skills are and how they operate in practice is one objective of this study. Debate also can provide students with opportunities to form relationships with adults who can serve as their guides and advocates in educational settings (Mueller 2007; Lareau 2015). Specifically, debate coaches may recruit underperforming students who show promise as debaters but struggle in traditional classroom settings, therefore instilling in those students a sense of connection to their schools that they may otherwise struggle to find (Miller 2006). Debate teams often serve “as a home space for [their] participants – a space of powerful and intense relationships” (Fine 2001, 134). Within this setting, debaters can develop “dense” relationships with their coaches and teammates (Khan 2010, 64), which may in turn improve their comfort in educational institutions overall (Miller 2006). The “embodied interactional resources” that students cultivate in activities like debate become important aspects of their developing cultural repertoires (Khan 2010, 20).

Debate also offers a unique opportunity for adolescents to gain valuable cognitive skills

because of their exposure to challenging academic material. These skills can help debaters achieve success in academic and professional settings. First, competitive interscholastic debate is premised on the idea of “switch-side” advocacy in which teams must defend both sides of a given topic (switching sides each round over the course of a tournament, which can consist of anywhere from three to approximately twelve rounds). Thus, unlike other advocacy-based activities such as student council or Model UN, debaters must make arguments that directly contradict other positions they argue for, and that may even contradict their own deeply held convictions. Fine argues that this practice carries profound advantages for debaters' social and critical thinking skills, as “taking a position contrary to one's beliefs helps one to appreciate the perspectives of opponents...and increases one's awareness of counterarguments” (2000, 12; see also Munksgaard and Pfister 2003). These switch-side advocacy skills can help individuals approach “complex, multifaceted, and technical topics that do not lend themselves to reductionist, formal analysis” even beyond the school setting (Mitchell 2010, 97). Broadly, then, the literature suggests that there are advantages associated with the formal structure of competitive interscholastic debate.

Additionally, competitive debate exposes adolescents to academic authors from Agamben to Žižek; most UDL debaters are at least somewhat conversant in feminist and anti-racist literatures, and can utilize these works to become self-advocates in the face of unjust educational and social institutions (Miller 2006). Debate can help adolescents cope with unfairness in their daily lives by affording them a space in which to critique unjust adult behaviors, ranging from broad federal policies to localized behaviors within the debate community (Warner and Bruschke 2001).<sup>3</sup> These advocacy skills may empower students to request customization in their interactions with institutional authorities, which can pay off in the form of access to more challenging opportunities, more individualized attention, and/or stronger

interpersonal relationships (Lareau 2011). As I document below, debaters' "capacity to act in a way that produces meaningful change in oneself or the environment" reflects their growing agency, a key aspect of meaningful efforts to incorporate student voice into school structures (Toshalis & Nakkula 2012, 27). Overall, I argue that debate represents one context in which students can develop skills that facilitate their success in dominant institutions.

## **Data and Methods**

### *Field Sites and Data Sources*

The data in this study come primarily from six months of observational fieldwork with two debate teams in the Chicago Debate League (CDL). I worked with the CDL to identify two field sites in neighborhood schools in Chicago Public Schools (CPS), where debate was offered as an extracurricular activity and where the team was not in its (often tumultuous) first year of existence. One school, which I call Greenside, is located on Chicago's South Side. Its student body is roughly 98% Black, and it has approximately 1,200 students. The other school, which I call Stewart, is located on the city's West Side. It is nearly three-quarters Hispanic, with the remainder of the student body comprised of Black and white students. Stewart is home to approximately 1,600 students. Both schools are ranked level 2+, the median of five possible quality rankings assigned by CPS (CPS n.d.). In terms of percentage of low-income students (around 75%), freshmen on-track rate, student attendance, 5-year graduation rates, and average SAT scores, both schools perform average to slightly-below-average as compared to other schools in CPS (CPS n.d.). Thus, I treat Greenside and Stewart as typical neighborhood public schools akin to those that Jack's (2016) "doubly-disadvantaged" students attended. Like their peers in these schools, and like debaters in the CDL overall (Mezuk et al. 2011), the vast majority of debaters on Greenside's and Stewart's teams were low-income students of color. All of the Greenside debaters were Black; most Stewart debaters were Hispanic, with some Black

and white students also on the team. Greenside had approximately ten members on its team, while Stewart had roughly fifteen. These numbers fluctuated a bit from practice to practice and tournament to tournament, but they represent student attendance on a typical day for debate activities.

Over the course of six months during the 2017-2018 CDL debate season, I attended practices and tournaments with both teams. All members of each team were invited to participate in the study, and students were allowed to continue participating in debate if they chose not to participate in the study (a very small number of debaters from each school did so). In a given week, I observed practices four weekday afternoons (two at Greenside and two at Stewart), as well as one weekend tournament per month with each school. Laptop use is common in debate, and both Greenside and Stewart debaters used computers from their coaches' laptop carts during practices, so I was able to inconspicuously use my laptop to take field notes. I took notes about both debate- and non-debate-oriented conversations, and I asked debaters and coaches about any terms or topics that were unclear to me. In total, I conducted approximately 250 hours of observations.

After becoming familiar with typical patterns of activity in my field sites, I began conducting interviews with debaters and their coaches during months four through six of fieldwork. Interviews took place in libraries, hallways, and empty classrooms – anywhere I could find a quiet space to talk – and typically lasted for thirty minutes. They covered issues like the challenges students faced in the activity, how debate compares to other activities, and what changes debaters saw in themselves from before they joined the activity to the present. I selected students for interviews based on regular practice attendance (i.e., I did not interview debaters who only attended competitions and not practices, or those who attended practices only once every couple of weeks) and scheduling availability.<sup>4</sup> In total, I interviewed twelve debaters, six

each from Stewart and Greenside. I also interviewed the coaches from each team, for a total of fourteen interviews. Four student interviewees were freshmen, four were sophomores, two were juniors, and two were seniors. This grade-level distribution among interviewees roughly reflected those of the debate teams overall. Four interviewees were boys, and eight were girls, again roughly reflecting the gender distribution of participants in the CDL (Mezuk et al. 2011). I used these individual interviews to probe students about themes I had noticed over the course of my prior observations, and to better understand students' ideas about their personal experiences in debate. In other words, interviews were intended to supplement my observations, and were not my primary mode of data collection.

### *Data Analysis*

Over the course of this study, I produced preliminary write-ups of my findings every two months in order to help synthesize my data and identify key themes in my notes. Based on these write-ups, I reoriented my observations and questions to focus on the areas that emerged as central for the study, particularly those “observational surprises or puzzles” that challenged my prior understandings and assumptions (Timmermans & Tavory 2012, 169). In order to keep track of the significant patterns and themes in my data, as well as how I shifted the focus of my observations over time, I produced analytical memos multiple times per week while in the field. Data collection and analysis were thus interactive and co-informing processes (Corbin & Strauss 1990; Woods 2005).

After completing observations and interviews, I coded my field notes and interview transcripts using the Dedoose qualitative coding application. I used open coding during initial rounds to identify themes and patterns in the data, moving to focused coding in later cycles (Saldaña 2015). During the coding process, I kept analytical memos and compared these memos to those I produced during fieldwork. These analytical memos helped clarify consistencies

across the observational and interview data. After identifying key themes and defining codes, I re-read chronologically through my field notes in order to become more familiar with specific debaters' experiences over the course of the season. I then (re-)coded these individual stories to help me better understand how students' ongoing experiences in debate contributed to changes over time (Corbin & Strauss 1990). In order to protect the identities of participants, debaters are identified only by a pseudonym, their school name (also a pseudonym), and their grade level.

### *Researcher Positionality*

Because I revealed to participants that I was a debater in high school, students sometimes approached me with questions about the activity, and coaches occasionally turned to me for advice about topics with which they were less familiar. I answered such questions when asked, but often reminded participants that I was “just there to take notes” to allow myself to exit these conversations and focus on conducting observations. Still, because I am both an adult and knowledgeable about the activity, debaters viewed me as an asset; one remarked early in my fieldwork that I was “like another coach, like, another resource for us to use.” To them, it made little difference whether I was a researcher or a coach: I was able to explain many of the idiosyncratic conventions and jargon of the activity, and therefore my presence was a resource to draw upon. As will be demonstrated in my findings, this enthusiasm about taking advantage of the resources available was a common trait among debaters in this study.

As a young, middle-class white woman, I am demographically similar to many of the teachers in these students' schools. However, students read my attire and comportment as noticeably un-teacher-like. I dressed casually, sat in student desks, and mostly kept to myself while taking notes. In my first few days of fieldwork at each school, I was asked by multiple students whether I was a new student. I worked to maintain distance between myself and teachers/coaches, for example by sitting among groups of students rather than adults and not

admonishing students when they spoke to me about provocative or taboo subjects such as sexuality or minor rule-breaking in school. While I often noticed their relative candor with me as compared to their coaches, my status as a middle-class white woman clearly affected what students shared with me. During one tournament, a group of girls from Greenside expressed surprise that I did not object when a debater stated that white people homogenize the racial/ethnic identities of people of color, for example by viewing her as Black rather than by her family's countries of origin. As this exchange made clear, my racial status influenced how participants in this study felt they should interact with me. However, because the other adults present during the majority of my observations – Stewart's and Greenside's coaches, and many judges during tournaments – were also white, I do not believe that my presence significantly changed the nature of the behaviors that took place in the debate space.

## **Findings**

### *Dominant Cultural Capital*

Debaters in this study acquired two key sets of attitudes and behaviors that afforded them dominant cultural capital: confidence demanding feedback, and strategies for evaluating complex ideas.

#### Demanding Feedback

Debaters I observed learned to demand and adapt to critical feedback from peers, coaches, and judges. Comfort placing demands on figures of authority – such as requests for “assistance, accommodations, and attention” – is a form of dominant cultural capital that is highly valued in educational settings (Calarco 2018, 9). Debaters learned, through repeated interactions with peers and authorities in the debate space, to request high-quality feedback that they could use to their own advantage. Feedback was seen as crucially important to improving one's debate skills, and strategies for responding to it were seen as valuable beyond the debate



setting. As Sofia, a sophomore from Stewart, told me unprompted during a tournament early in the season:

I need all the criticism I can get. I used to not like it; my novice [freshman] year, I was like, ‘you don't like my speaking, I'm so bad.’ But now I take it as, ‘cool, I can improve my speaking, I can improve my arguments.’ I want to hear all of it.

She echoed the same sentiment in her interview at the end of the season:

Before debate, criticism was weird for me, 'cause it was still very pessimistic. 'Cause when I hear ‘criticism’ I was like, ‘that's a negative connotation.’ You carry that idea around criticism. But now I'm just a lot more open with it, and I'm like, ‘criticism may not be so bad!’ 'Cause that's how you progress as a person. You hear what you need to work on, and then you take that feedback, and you re-work it into something positive.

For Sofia, learning how to accept criticism productively and respond to it effectively are skills she gained over time as a debater. At both Stewart and Greenside, debaters rarely completed an exercise without seeking feedback from anyone who would give it. It was not uncommon to see a coach and a student engaged in conversation about strategies for improvement over the course of twenty or thirty minutes – a signal from coaches as dominant authority figures that debaters' demands for their input was both appropriate and important.

When feedback was given, it was rarely accepted as adequate. “Anything else?” was a constant refrain from debaters after receiving criticism. In fact, receiving prompt, thorough feedback was considered so crucial for debaters that a visiting judge (a coach of a university debate team) asked four high school debaters permission to send them feedback via email later rather than providing it verbally on the spot. The students acquiesced, but still took advantage of the opportunity chat with the judge about the possibility of joining his college debate team in the future. They did not seem surprised that the coach felt he needed their permission to send his

feedback later – reversing the typical direction of permission-seeking between youth and adults – even though he represented a significant figure of authority as both a judge and a college coach. The students seemed unfazed despite his elite status and his ability to significantly affect their futures through his influence on the admissions and scholarship processes. The debaters felt entitled to immediate, thorough input about their performances; the coach's request for permission to provide feedback later signaled the validity of this expectation, demonstrating that for debaters to receive feedback at the judge's convenience was the exception rather than the rule.

Debaters were so comfortable demanding extensive, high-quality feedback that they disparaged judges who failed to provide it. After one tournament, I watched Stewart debaters and their coach leaf through ballots (papers where judges record their decision, how they reached their decision, and brief comments for each team). I heard debaters and the coach bemoan “crappy” ballots and excitedly show off “good” ones. Initially, I thought that these distinctions might be based on whether or not the judge said positive things about the Stewart debaters. However, when I asked a junior named Julian what made a ballot “good,” he told me that it had “a lot of good feedback on it.” He showed me – the ballot was covered in extensive notes. Then, for comparison, a “crappy” one – sparse. I was struck by the fact that some of the “good” ballots were marked as losses for the Stewart team, and some of the “crappy” ones were wins. Later, at Greenside, a freshman named Sharlene made a similar distinction between “good” and “bad” feedback. To her, “good” feedback included both recognition of a debater's strengths as well as specific, actionable areas for improvement, while “bad” feedback was overly vague and typically brief. As with the Stewart debaters, Sharlene was more concerned with receiving high-quality feedback (that she could leverage for her own improvement) than with receiving empty compliments or critiques. It is worth noting that these ideas about good and bad

feedback were not isolated to one team; debaters from both schools shared these attitudes.

Late in the season, I asked students from both schools directly about what constituted “good” versus “bad” feedback. All of the debaters agreed with Sharlene, who said “good” feedback must be specific and actionable while “bad” feedback is overly vague. When I asked debaters for examples of bad feedback, the most common answer I received was “good speaking.” It is significant that, to these students, receiving a vague compliment – without specific information about *what* was good about their speaking and *why* it was good – represented “bad feedback,” because it did not provide any information that they could use to their advantage. They did not demand feedback to earn compliments or boost their self-confidence; they sought to identify areas for improvement. Ali, a freshman from Stewart, exemplified this attitude in her interview. I asked her for an example of bad feedback, and she offered this:

‘Good speaking. Nice organization. Nice use of prep time. So yeah, that's all, good round guys.’ Like, that doesn't give me anything! ‘Great time management, I like the way you use your voice.’ ...Tell me actual feedback on the content of the round, you know? I want to get better, I want more information in my head as to how I can improve the content of our debates.

Ali's teammate Monica, a sophomore, agreed. She described bad feedback like this:

[It] will be like, ‘okay, you had good speaking’ — and I already know I'm a good speaker — and ‘you had some good arguments, alright, I'm gonna leave.’ It's annoying, 'cause like, I wanna know what I did wrong. And I can take constructive criticism, so if you give that to me, I can work with it.

For Monica, what is important about feedback is whether or not it includes information that she can “work with.” Similarly, at Greenside, a senior named Promise distinguished between bad

feedback and critical feedback. She said that critical feedback, unlike bad feedback, is valuable because it can help her improve: “I feel like even bad feedback — well, *not* bad [feedback], but feedback that's saying you're doing bad in this part — [it] helps you as a debater. Because you know what you could have said, and it like, makes you more prepared in another round.” For these debaters, bad feedback represented a missed opportunity to gain valuable information that could help them improve.

Since most of these students are members of racial/ethnic minority groups, they may be especially unlikely to receive high-quality feedback from teachers (Harber et al. 2012). Therefore, debate may pose a unique opportunity for them to acquire meaningful feedback from adults. As Omari, a freshman from Greenside, explained during his interview:

The feedback in debate, they point out what you could've done better. The feedback in school — I've never gotten feedback in school, not really...Some feedback, it doesn't really help you understand, because a lot of teachers don't tell you personally what you did wrong, what you did right...So the feedback in debate, it can be better, it can be more personal than the feedback in school, because not every teacher's able to connect to you.

Michele, a freshman at Stewart, agreed during her interview:

In debate, it's like, ‘oh, you lost a round, okay. Well, this is what you need to do to not do that again.’ In class, if you get a problem wrong or you don't answer a question correctly, it's like, ‘oh, you got that wrong. It should've been this answer.’ And that's what happens a lot. ‘It should've been this.’ And they just tell you what it should have been, not what you could do differently to stop yourself from confusing the answers. And so I think that debate really is helpful in that sense.

To Michele, debate is “helpful” because it offers her the opportunity to learn how to avoid

repeating mistakes; in this way, it is unlike school, where mistakes are pointed out but feedback about how to avoid them is absent.

Michele's – and other debaters' – attitudes towards feedback demonstrate an ability to adapt to critical feedback and use it to their advantage, a key intrapersonal skill that may allow them to improve their performances in educational and occupational settings after high school (National Research Council 2013). Debaters' ease in demanding feedback from adults in positions of authority suggests that they have gained valuable interactional skills as compared to other “doubly-disadvantaged” students (Khan 2010; Lareau 2011; Jack 2016). These interactions give debaters opportunities to gain favor and advance their own agendas; for example, seeking advice on how to improve their debate performance echoes how a conversation might take place with a professor about how to improve a paper (Jack 2016). In this way, learning to demand feedback affords debaters dominant cultural capital as they develop comfort interacting with figures of authority.

### Evaluating Complex Ideas

As debaters progress through the activity and become exposed to more complex arguments, the ideas they engage with correspondingly more challenging. As a result, debaters develop strategies for deconstructing and analyzing difficult new concepts. These cognitive abilities – learning “ways of knowing...ways of thinking [and ways of] relating to the world” rather than “facts themselves” – are “marks of the elite” (Khan 2011, 120). Whereas “knowledge is no longer the exclusive domain of the elite... the important *decisions* required for those who lead are not based on knowing more but instead are founded in habits of mind” (Khan 2011, 119). In other words, certain “habits of mind” represent dominant forms of cultural capital. Although Bourdieu and Passeron contend that “the capacity to decipher and manipulate complex [logical or aesthetic] structures” depends on linguistic skills formed the family (1977, 73), I

argue that debate experience affords students a unique opportunity to build and practice sophisticated skills of interpretation and analysis outside of both the family and the traditional classroom. For example, Amanda, a Greenside senior, demonstrated her well-honed analytical tools during practice one afternoon. She was reading an argument which claimed that any new federal policies regarding public education would fail because states lost trust in the federal government after the Great Recession. As she read, she walked to the whiteboard to jot down some notes. First, she divided the argument between its empirical claims (that states lost trust in the federal government) and its predictive claims (that this lack of trust means that future federal interventions will fail). Next, she defined the terms in the argument that she was unfamiliar with, or a bit unsure about: implicit, consensus, federalism, enumerated. Finally, when she felt that she sufficiently grasped the argument, she turned to her coach and – in a one-on-one exchange that would be unusual in her classes – shared her interpretation to check that her understanding was correct.

Familiarity with complex literatures, as well as the strategies debaters use to understand them, sets these students up for success in challenging courses throughout high school and college. Debaters often talked about how their classes seemed easy compared to the work they did in debate. In her interview, Amanda from Greenside mentioned that debate helped her approach problems in courses ranging from her proof-based geometry class to her English class. As she described it, “[Debate is] helping me think better.” Sofia from Stewart, in her interview, expressed a similar sentiment. She felt that debate helped her learn how to articulate her ideas in all of her classes: “Debate gave me the feeling that I could link things together that I didn't think of before. Or like, I could ask questions that [are now] possible for me to ask, but I never knew I could use that [term] in a sentence, or use that word, you know, I could formulate that [idea].” Thus, debate can both provide much-needed intellectual stimulation for under-challenged

students, and can help build the foundation for students to approach difficult ideas in the future. Much like privileged students in elite schools, these debaters are not only (or even mostly) learning facts or pieces of information; they are learning “how to think” (Khan 2010, 158).

Some of the intellectual stimulation that debaters experience comes from the necessity of debating both sides of every given topic, or switch-side debating. Ebony from Greenside explained that in debate, “you have to argue both sides, even if you don't agree with it...If you look at both sides of it, and then you look at the evidence that you've actually done the research for, then you can make the clear decision for yourself.” She explained that by defending both sides, debaters have to challenge their own beliefs and assumptions, and that they have to tailor their arguments to their audience: the judge. Debaters agreed that the switch-side format of debate is beneficial, as illustrated in an interview with Promise from Greenside:

I feel like, for you to have the ability to argue both sides, you're gaining a new perspective...Being able to switch sides, it's like, you're not just stuck to one thing. You're forced to think about new perspectives. 'Cause debate, it's about you educating yourself.

Monica from Stewart agreed:

You actually get someone else's point of view. Because you're not just stuck in this rut where, ‘oh, I believe this, and only my way is the way.’ There's a lot of kids that are like that these days....And that's how I used to be, so that's why I'm glad I get to argue both sides.

The perspective-switching that exists in debate has academic payoffs; Omari, a Greenside freshman, explained how switch-side debate helped him in his classes:

Debate, it makes you think about, ‘how might this person think?’ So I can address that. Like, in my math class, I explained the answer to a problem [about] the breaking [break

even] point — where they [the lines] intersected [in a supply-demand equation]. Some people didn't know what a breaking point was... So I just like, tried to 'debate' it real quick. I explained what the breaking point was. I was like, 'I'm gonna explain to the class how we got our answer.'... So I broke it down into pieces... That's one thing I did [that was] like debate.

Interestingly, for Omari, to “debate” something in front of his class did not mean arguing about opposing sides of the issue; it meant developing a shared understanding of the relevant terms and explaining his thought process and perspective to the group.

This is not to say that debaters' arguments are all well-informed or enlightened. They struggled to grasp dense subjects, and it was not uncommon to hear debaters misunderstand the concepts they tried to utilize. For example, Sharlene and Omari, two Greenside freshmen, in January attempted to use the concept of “biopower” (Foucault 1990) to prove a point about the collection of student data, but could not define the term when their opponents asked. They realized that they did not understand their case well enough, and spent the next few weeks working on learning more about the concept. By mid-February, both Sharlene and Omari had independently asked their coach to grill them about biopower in training exercises, and each was able to competently (albeit imperfectly) articulate the concept. Their experiences in debate over the course of the season had helped them learn how to approach what is typically a college-level concept.

Struggling with complex ideas, or arguing in favor positions one believes to be untrue, are practices that debaters prize. As Sasha from Greenside explained, “In the classroom, you get one [leg] up, because you already know how to dissect a passage or something, and understand why it's valuable or not valuable. [You're] not just stating your evidence, but actually giving analysis on it.” For her, the strategies she learned in debate gave her an advantage over her peers



because she knew how to approach unfamiliar ideas and could identify the assumptions at work in arguments she disagreed with. In other words, even trying and failing to understand Foucault (or any complex literature) gives debaters an edge over their peers who are never afforded the opportunity to grapple with such ideas at all.

Learning to learn – even (or especially) when facing challenging material – constitutes a valuable set of attitudes and behaviors for students who pursue higher education. Debate exposes students to a pedagogical model that mirrors those found in elite educational institutions. Khan describes such a model: “The point is to develop a voice, and interpretation, and a way of articulating it...It’s not about knowing those [concrete] things for these kids. It’s about this vague, intangible way of knowing that becomes embodied ease” (2011, 123). “A voice, and interpretation, and a way of articulating it” could easily be a description of what one gains from debate; these ideas percolated consistently through interviews with debaters and coaches alike. The cognitive tools debaters develop reflect these conceptual ways of knowing, granting them dominant cultural capital which they can activate across institutional settings.

### *Adaptive Cultural Capital*

Beyond the dominant cultural capital that debaters developed, they also gained adaptive cultural capital in the form of resilience. Resilience is a key cultural trait demanded of students from non-dominant social groups. For example, Berg notes that administrators frequently state that “self-motivation is a required element of successful low-income students” because they can only overcome the obstacles they face if they are sufficiently motivated (2010, 66). In this lens, cultural attributes are expected to overcome structural challenges; resilience is seen as the way to respond to obstacles. Non-dominant students are expected to have the dominant cultural capital required of all students *as well as* the adaptive cultural capital to overcome structural challenges. For example, a student who faces little adversity may meet and exceed institutional expectations

without needing to draw upon their resilience; a student who faces much adversity cannot (see Fig. 1). In this section, I describe how debaters build resilience – beyond what they already possess – thus acquiring cultural capital which is not characteristic of dominant social groups but which is nevertheless institutionally-valued.

I view resilience as distinct from, but related to, grit. Grit refers to individuals' passion and perseverance towards a long-term goal or set of goals (Duckworth 2016). Resilience is a part of grit, but refers to an individual's ability to bounce back from a specific setback. Although some debaters spoke about long-term goals, my data do not allow me to assess their capacity to meet those goals. As a result, I cannot evaluate debaters' grit. However, the more immediate nature of resilience enabled me to observe debaters demonstrating the attitudes and behaviors that constitute it. In coping with losses – a frequent occurrence in an activity in which 50% of participants lose each match and each competition includes multiple matches – debaters had little choice but to bounce back from their frequent setbacks.

Debaters learned to view losing as a valuable experience. While they sometimes became frustrated after losing certain rounds, they overall tended to express appreciation for the losses they faced. For example, Sasha – a junior from Greenside – told me in her interview that losing “is like, a learning experience... You're not always gonna win in life, you're not always gonna be number one, you're not always gonna be the top, the best, and get everything. So when you lose, you got to learn how to take that losing and know what to do with it.” Winning many debates was not the goal most students in this study explicitly sought to achieve; instead, they hoped to learn. Sofia from Stewart summarized this attitude well, while waiting for the judge's decision after a challenging round that she suspected she lost:

I'm learning now that I can win and lose debate rounds equally — like, regardless of what the ballot says, I can be winning and losing at the same time. So I don't really care that

much about my record. I mean, I do care how I do, of course, but I just learn so much going against good debaters. Like [my opponent] is great, he's so smart and such a good debater, so I can learn from that. I don't look at him and think, 'oh, he's a jerk' or whatever. I think, like in this round, 'I just learned so much going against him.'

For Sofia, the chance to "learn so much" meant that she was "winning," even if the ballot recorded a loss. Importantly, she explained that she was coming to see things this way now, after a year and a half in the activity; it took time for her to learn how to build such a perspective.

Debaters encouraged one another to view losing as a valuable experience. In this way, they transmitted adaptive cultural capital among themselves as peers. For example, while walking to the cafeteria after a round, Monica from Stewart asked her teammate Ali whether she was planning on attending the state championship. Ali said no, because she was tired from having competed all season. Monica pushed her to reconsider:

But you learn so much! You hit [compete against] these suburban schools and you get [to hear] all these new affs [affirmative cases] and it's great. I mean, I cried when I went, but then I thought, 'I learned so much, and we'll do better at cities [the city championship tournament].' And I did!

Monica's strategy was one that would be compelling to Ali, who – at a previous tournament – had approached me between rounds to share something about her opponents: "We keep going against seniors, and I'm really excited about it! Because I figure, if we're going to lose, we might as well lose really badly so we can learn what to do better." It is worth noting that Monica promoted the value of the state championship tournament to Ali with the expectation of losing. She had found competing in the state championship tournament to be worthwhile not because she thought she had any chance of winning many (or any) rounds, but rather because it meant she got to learn new arguments.

As for most debaters, it was not the case that winning and losing were irrelevant for Monica. She cried after losing repeatedly at the state tournament the previous year. She had believed that attending state championships would give her more competitive success at the city championship, and she was happy to report that it did. Debate is more fun when one wins, and less fun when one loses – each of the debaters in this study agreed about this. All twelve debaters who participated in interviews reported that winning is “fun” (a statement nearly always accompanied by a sheepish smile), and that losing is a learning experience. Omari, a Greenside freshman, illustrated a typical perspective in his interview:

I had more losses in debate [this season] than wins... I think losing the debate helps you because it makes you more focused and it makes you learn from your mistakes, so you'll be able to do better at the next tournament. When you win the rounds, it feels good...[But] you can learn from losing because the judges, they write ballots. So you'll learn what you did bad... So that's how my losses help me.

Developing the mindset of losing as a learning experience can be a challenge for new debaters. Michele, A Stewart freshman, discussed the difficulty in her interview:

Something hard in debate is understanding why you lose a round...I'm trying really hard to stay humble and say ‘okay, I lost because of these reasons.’ And like, during feedback after a round, I always ask the judge, ‘what can I do to be better?’...I want to further myself in debate, and so I know that I need to stay humble in order to do that.

Michele helped highlight a change that debaters undergo in the activity; while none of the more experienced students mentioned continuing to struggle with losses, this novice debater was still “learning to learn” from the experience of losing (National Research Council 2013:31). Still, in her view, losing was valuable (despite being emotionally difficult) because it offered her an opportunity to improve.

Even the most winning debaters in this study lost often, and all of the debaters I observed developed strategies for coping with – or taking advantage of – their losses. Two different partnerships, one from Stewart and one from Greenside, demonstrated distinct strategies for facing a difficult situation. At city championships, after the first four rounds, each pair believed they held two wins and two losses. The Greenside debaters were both freshmen, Sharlene and Omari, and they encouraged one another to stay positive and not give up. They continually reassured one another that they were trying their hardest, and that they would keep doing so. They were concerned about their record, but pointed to their wins as evidence of their success, and were steadfast that they would not quit in the face of losses. This strategy is noticeably different than that of the Stewart team, both sophomores – Aleks and Sofia – who displayed a more sophisticated response to their 2-2 record. They spent their time between rounds sitting in the cafeteria, or standing in hallways, strategizing with their coach and with judges. They were hardly concerned with their record, instead preferring to dig deep into the mechanics of their rounds. They reported their win-loss status to anyone who asked, but said it with a shrug and immediately dove back into discussion of the content of the debates. Because they had been debating – and therefore losing – for longer than the Greenside freshman, the prospect of giving up did not need to be explicitly dismissed because it was not even considered a possibility. Instead, Aleks and Sofia maintained a forward-facing perspective, considering how the rounds they had already debated (whether they had won or lost) could inform their future strategies. While Sharlene and Omari used their existing stores of resilience to explicitly reject the possibility of quitting, Aleks and Sofia could draw upon their more extensive experiences in the activity to avoid the necessity of this explicit rejection and instead develop a more future-oriented strategy.

Learning to face losses with resilience, and to learn from one's mistakes, represent

valuable attitudes upon which debaters can draw in academic and professional contexts (Dweck 2006; National Research Council 2013). For example, compared to students whose parents attended college, first-generation college students demonstrate a greater fear of failing in college (Bui 2002; Jury, Smeding, and Darnon 2015). This fear may contribute to an avoidance of contexts in which they fear they may be out-performed by others (Sommet et al. 2015; Jury et al. 2015). Because more advantaged students are less likely to face this fear, the ability to overcome it may be necessary for their success. While resilience may be helpful for these students, it is not obligatory. However, resilience does represent a necessary resource for non-dominant students to successfully access and navigate dominant educational institutions (Berg 2010; Armstrong & Hamilton 2013). In this way, resilience represents a form of adaptive cultural capital. I argue that debaters build their resilience through their growing comfort facing failure. Thus, debaters build forms of institutionally-valued cultural capital that go beyond dominant cultural capital.

### *Using Their Skills*

Dominant and adaptive cultural capital are valuable because of the benefits they afford individuals in accessing and navigating dominant institutions. Debaters in this study drew upon the tools they developed in the activity to advocate for themselves and others, both within and beyond the debate setting. For example, they used their confidence interacting with authority figures to demand high-quality, tailored instruction from their coaches. The debaters at Greenside often interrupted their coaches to ask for clarification, or to check whether their understanding of a topic was correct. If they felt unsure about a certain concept, they asked the coach to explain it again, sometimes requesting that the coach use specific strategies such as writing on the whiteboard or using examples from their texts. Similarly, at Stewart, the coach was so accustomed to receiving feedback from his debaters that he often solicited their opinions about the drills and activities he had planned. Usually, the students suggested modifications, to

which the coach almost always agreed. Instructional customization had thus become an ingrained part of Stewart's practices. These demands for tailoring and customization demonstrate a “sense of entitlement” in educational settings that Lareau (2011) argues are more typically characteristic of middle-class students than the poor and working-class students in this study.

Beyond the debate setting, debaters displayed advocacy skills that enabled them to critique practices in their schools and classes. A Stewart sophomore named Sofia noted how, since joining debate, she had become more critical of her teachers:

I'll ask some pretty [tough] questions... 'cause I actually think about things that we're learning. I used to not think about it, I used to be like, 'oh, they're a teacher, they should be qualified to give me stuff [to do].' But now I sit there and I'm like, 'hm, is this really what we're supposed to be learning?' I actually ask stuff, so it [debate] has definitely created a lot for me when it comes to questioning... It gave me the ability to be like, 'my voice matters,' you know? Like, I can say anything I want in that classroom, and I don't care whoever thinks that it's important, *I* think it's important... I have the power for myself.

Since joining the activity, she has felt empowered to stand up for herself not only in the classroom, but throughout her life:

Not only in class, but like, in and out of my life... I speak a lot more fluently, and I have a lot more confidence about myself — even though I didn't know I had that confidence, I [now] know I have it for some reason — because of debate. There's been given so much power to me, because of the voice that now I have, from the platform that debate is.

Like Sofia, many debaters used their newly acquired cultural capital in ways that extended beyond their classrooms. Omari, a freshman at Greenside, explained it as such:

Debate...It gets you more engaged. And it helps you more in real life. 'Cause in real life, you will need the speaking skills, and like, building up your presence when you're talking and stuff. And that's how debate can better help you.

A Stewart debater demonstrated these real-life advocacy skills early in the season. One afternoon, the coach announced that he'd be ending practice with some good news. After he gathered everyone's attention, he shared:

Aleks [a sophomore debater] was able to go to the LSC, local school council, on Monday and he said that we needed some money for laptops and they approved us for \$10,000 a year for the next two years for laptops [for the team].

As mentioned above, this team already had access to a laptop cart in their coach's classroom; however, the debaters often complained that they were too slow or outdated. Thus, Aleks used his membership on the team to obtain better technology for himself and his teammates.

Debaters also used their participation in the activity to gain scholarships and admission to competitive colleges. Aleks told me excitedly during a tournament early in the season about the former captain of the team: "Dominic — the old captain here, he graduated now — he goes to the University of [State] now for debate...He got a \$45,000 scholarship, full tuition, for debate." A freshman Stewart debater named Ali recounted the same information to me in her interview, and continued: "And like, that's a lot of money. If I don't get scholarships, I'm not going to college. So I kinda have to survey what I'm good at and figure out what's gonna get me into college. And if it's debate, it's debate!" Many of the students on both the Greenside and Stewart teams saw similar futures for themselves: they expected to earn debate scholarships and continue debating in college, or to earn merit scholarships on the basis of their grades and extracurricular involvements (including debate) that would allow them to attend selective and expensive schools that would otherwise be beyond their means. In other words, many of these students viewed



debate as their ticket to college. They intended to draw upon the skills they developed in debate and use them to justify their belonging in dominant educational institutions.

### *Is It Debate?*

It is possible that the skills demonstrated by debaters in this study are skills they would have gained even without participating in competitive debate. There is evidence that debaters enter high school with higher eighth grade test scores than non-debaters (Mezuk 2009), perhaps suggesting that they are an unusually talented group of students. However, in their own understandings, it is debate – not school – that drives their acquisition of these new skills and attitudes. Sasha at Greenside told me about her “debate brain...that's where my whole mind turns on; it like, sucks everything up.” Significantly, she felt that her “debate brain” only “turns on” at tournaments, not at school. In her view, debate “works at your mind,” while her classes failed to offer intellectual stimulation. Michele at Stewart and Omari at Greenside felt similarly, each articulating that the feedback they received in debate was more valuable than the feedback they received in school because it was specific and actionable (see “Feedback and Adaptation” above). For these debaters, the opportunities they received in debate were meaningfully different from the ones they received in school, and their in-school opportunities alone would not have led to the same acquisition of cultural capital. Moreover, debaters demonstrate academic gains in relation to peers who enter high school with similar prior achievement and attendance (Mezuk et al. 2011). I argue that the dominant and adaptive cultural capital that debaters acquire can help explain these gains, as they become better-equipped than their non-debating peers to navigate the dominant cultural structures of their schools.

It is important to bear in mind that students do not randomly select to participate in debate. Rather, debaters are students who opted — for a variety of reasons — to join an academic extracurricular activity. Some debaters were aware of the social advantages it could

afford them, and joined the activity because of its potential payoffs in the future. For example, in interviews, a few students mentioned “college” as one of the reasons they decided to join their school’s debate team. However, a much larger proportion of debaters was unaware of these advantages when they initially joined the team. Instead, the most common response for why they joined was “because I like to argue.” Many debaters mentioned being tired of getting in trouble for arguing with teachers in class, so they joined the team as an outlet for their argumentative dispositions. Other reasons given for joining the team were “to try something new,” encouragement from parents or siblings, having friends on the team, and because “[the coach] seemed cool.” Regardless of their reasons for joining the team, debaters in this study viewed themselves as typical teenagers. Outside of debate, some participated in sports teams and others held part-time jobs; many struggled to get to school on time every day; some cycled on and off the team as peer groups and family obligations shifted, while others treated debate as constant foundation in their lives. In general, then, while some debaters represent an exceptionally talented and motivated group of students who would be likely to succeed regardless of their participation in the activity, many appear to be typical adolescents who gain unique opportunities as a result of their debate participation.

However, it is important to note that even if all of these debaters are driven, motivated, pro-social, and academically excellent students, the key findings presented here still hold: it is possible for certain “doubly-disadvantaged” students to gain dominant and adaptive cultural capital within their struggling neighborhood schools. Contrary to much of the existing literature about low-income students, and unlike many of their peers, debaters developed ease and comfort in demanding assistance and instructional tailoring from their teachers. These skills stand in contrast to portrayals of low-income youth as uniformly uncomfortable, constrained, and/or deferential in their interactions with figures of authority. Debaters' self-advocacy skills are likely

to pay off as these youth encounter new institutions when they enter into young adulthood, a transition period during which many of their peers will struggle (Lareau 2011; Armstrong & Hamilton 2013). Moreover, by learning in an environment that emphasizes “ways of knowing rather than...the facts themselves” (Khan 2010, 159), debaters are given opportunities to build cognitive strategies that otherwise tend to be absent from under-resourced schools.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

As these data demonstrate, participation in competitive debate enables low-income youth from under-resourced public schools to gain dominant and adaptive cultural capital that are valued in dominant institutions. While researchers have known for decades that students' extant cultural capital shapes their opportunities to learn, research has largely neglected to examine how low-income youth can acquire institutionally-valued cultural capital within under-resourced schools. Additionally, while researchers have documented that debate participation predicts increases in academic achievement and attainment (Barfield 1989; Peters 2009; Mezuk et al. 2011), the mechanisms producing these results have been unclear, hindering our ability to extract theoretical or policy implications from the case of interscholastic debate. This project addresses these gaps by analyzing the specific attitudes and behaviors debaters develop in the activity, the ways in which they acquire these dispositions, and the contexts in which they put their new skills to use. I argue that debaters' development of dominant and adaptive cultural capital might be one factor contributing to documented gains in their academic performance.

I found that debaters became comfortable demanding high-quality, actionable feedback and actively worked to improve their debating on the basis of the feedback they received. They developed rigorous strategies for analyzing challenging concepts, and learned how to rigorously consider ideas from multiple points of view. They also learned to approach losses with resilience, as an opportunity to adapt and persevere. Their growing resources of cultural capital

were demonstrated in their advocacy for themselves and others, both within and beyond the debate setting. They built these skills over time, and spoke often of the differences between their confidence and capabilities before and after joining the debate team. In their own perspectives, debate was a crucial factor in their ongoing development.

The findings presented here demonstrate that debate participation may have important implications for students' success in college and the workplace. For example, while Jack (2016) notes that many low-income students from under-resourced neighborhood schools feel uncomfortable attending office hours and seeking feedback from instructors, debaters in this study demonstrated confidence and skill in similar activities that might translate into college. Because the data in this study are limited to the high school setting, more work should be done to investigate whether such payoffs occur in higher education. Further, as so-called “growth mindsets” have been linked to improved academic achievement and attainment, debaters' resilience and their desire for actionable feedback predict strong academic performance (Dweck 2006). Future research should further explore whether debate participation is linked explicitly to growth mindsets and their corresponding beneficial outcomes. More generally, research should be done in other academic extracurricular activities to investigate whether students develop similar or different cultural tools within those contexts. This work can help identify features of activities that promote strong academic outcomes, enabling practitioners to reproduce those features in other curricular and extracurricular settings.

The skills and attitudes that youth develop in debate may be especially important for scholars and policymakers committed to student voice efforts, which seek to incorporate young people as experts in decision-making processes at the school and classroom level. Student voice research indicates that in order to both be prepared to succeed in the future and to effectively navigate their present realities, youth need to develop confidence, connections, and competence

(NRC/IOM 2002) — common features of debate teams. Skills such as “the ability to recognize the problems in their environment” and attitudes such as a desire “to change them” are necessary for students to participate meaningfully in student voice efforts (Mitra 2008, 89). As shown here, debate trains students to identify problems and propose strategies to address them; debaters thus become both critics and novice policymakers. Debate may therefore be one avenue to help students develop the skills and attitudes which can allow them to become effective change-makers in their educational landscapes.

The findings presented here do not suggest that debate participation is a viable strategy for promoting social mobility among large swaths of non-dominant students. As Bourdieu (1973), Carter (2003), Lewis (2003), Lareau (2011), Jack (2016), Calarco (2018) and many others demonstrate, youth still face an educational system that privileges those who already have high levels of dominant cultural capital. Participation in activities like debate may be an effective strategy for certain individuals to develop cultural tools that can enable them to get ahead, but it does not work to change broader social inequalities. Put differently, competitive debate is a way for some students to acquire dominant and adaptive cultural capital, but it is not a means of shifting the educational system's biases away from favoring privileged classes. With this study, I document heterogeneity in the cultural capital that adolescents acquire within their high schools in order to illustrate diversity in the educational experiences of so-called “doubly-disadvantaged” students (Jack 2016).

Overall, this study demonstrates that extracurricular activities can be a site for students from under-resourced schools to gain new forms of cultural capital. I show that certain attitudes and behaviors that comprise dominant and adaptive cultural capital can be taught within urban public schools, if such settings are organized to afford students meaningful learning opportunities. I argue that certain structural features of debate, such as its switch-side design and

frequent exposure to losses, contribute to its ability to afford participants institutionally-valued cultural capital. These findings offer a perspective into one way that school-based learning opportunities can be leveraged to afford participants new forms of cultural capital.

**Research Ethics**

The University of Chicago Social Sciences Institutional Review Board and the Chicago Public Schools Research Review Board reviewed and approved my research protocol. All human subjects gave informed consent/assent prior to participating in the study, and informed consent of parents/legal guardians was obtained for subjects under the age of 18. Adequate steps were taken to protect participants' confidentiality. The contents of this manuscript do not reflect the views or policies of Chicago Public Schools or the Chicago Debate League.

### Notes

1. It is worth noting that institutional preferences for certain forms of cultural capital are powerful and durable, need not continue to reinforce structural inequalities. In the parlance of high school debate, to conflate the empirical reality with a normatively-preferable alternative would be to commit the “is-ought” fallacy: how the world *is* is not necessarily how it *ought* to be. If schools are concerned with helping their students succeed within existing social structures, helping youth acquire certain forms of cultural capital is important, even if a less- or differently-hierarchical society would be more just.
2. Some forms of capital Yosso identifies as “community cultural wealth” fall under the umbrella of adaptive cultural capital (navigational capital; aspirational capital; linguistic capital); others do not because they represent knowledge devalued by dominant institutions (familial capital, resistant capital).
3. For an example of students using debate training to criticize policies they see as unfair, see coverage of students from Marjory Stoneman Douglas high school advocating for gun control in the wake of a school shooting (Gurney 2018).
4. This convenience sampling means that the students represented in interview data were not casual, occasional members of the team. My decision to interview debaters who regularly attended practice was a logistical choice; I could make plans in person to schedule interviews, the only feasible way to do so as I was not permitted to collect personal contact information for all participants. However, it is worth bearing in mind that less frequently-involved debaters might have significant differences in terms of their attitudes about the activity. The observational data I collected includes both loosely- and heavily-involved members of the debate teams.



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